

TALES OF TERROR

THE HORROR MOVIES OF ROGER CORMAN

Michael Hoff re-visits the late-night
horror memories of his youth.

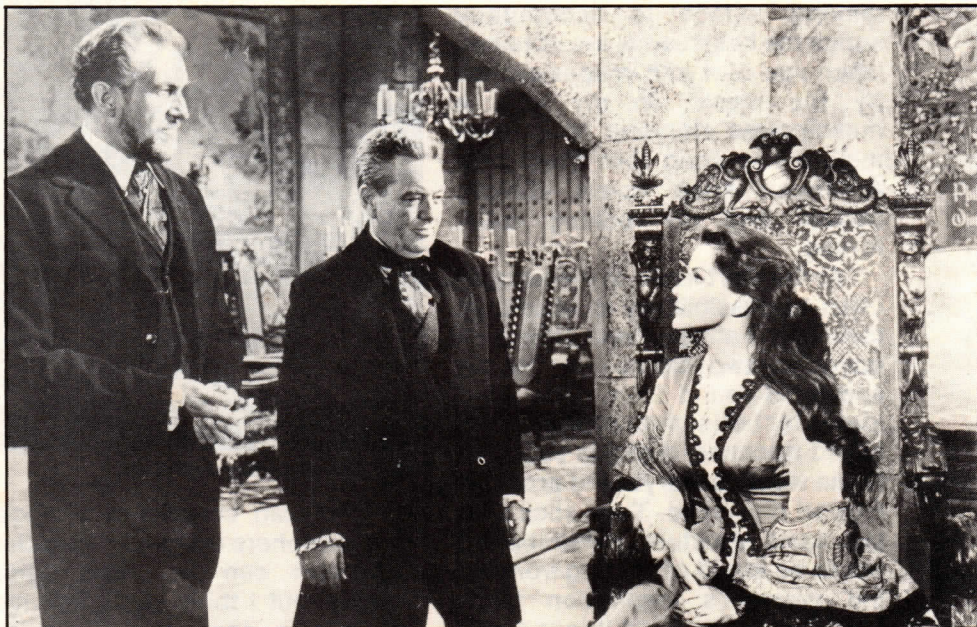
It was the summer of '73, I think, when I suddenly took to locking myself away every Saturday night in a darkened room. It was the height of the partying season, and yet at the same time every week, and with a devotion that bordered on the monastic, I would forsake the delights of dances and dinner parties to sit, wide eyed and expectant before a flickering television screen. My friends were perplexed. Had I developed a sudden and morbid dislike of social gatherings? And what, furthermore, had caused my sudden and mysterious fascination with BBC2?

The answer was shockingly simple. In its wisdom, the Beeb had decided that Summer to screen all six of a famous (some may say infamous) set of horror films made in the early sixties by American B movie director Roger Corman. All of these films were financed by American International Pictures (AIP for short); all of them starred emergent horror king Vincent Price, and all drew their material from the pen of the great gothic horror writer Edgar Allan Poe. They became universally known as AIPoes.

But these films had more than just names in common. They were characterised by swirling mists and thunder crashing over haunted castle where half-crazed maidens scratched at the lids of untimely tombs. If that sounds over the top,

how to cut corners mercilessly while still managing to convey an expensive feel to his films.

This trait was in evidence from the very first AIPoe movie, *Fall of The House of Usher*, made in colour on a budget of less than \$175,000. Despite this meagre financing, Corman's tight-fisted control and almost martinet-like discipline on the set made the films look like a million dollars. Vincent Price plays Roderick Usher in this famous Poe story of madness and premature burial set in a house that creaks, crumbles and eventually falls apart under the weight of its own evil. The closing scenes, as Usher's mad sister rises from her tomb to wreak havoc on the house and its occupants are grippingly handles, while the final inferno that engulfs the building is a trademark of the AIPoe films. No less than five



They devolved into a small but unique film genre with a distinctive style drawn equally from Poe's morbid scribblings, Corman's slick and deceptively lavish directing skills, and Vincent Price's own particular and somewhat over-wrought acting style.

The Corman/Price partnership was brought to AIP when the firm decided to forego its policy of rock bottom budgets and drive-in cheapies for a slightly classier brand of movie entertainment. Price had begun to make a name for himself in screamies like *The Fly* and *House of Wax*, while Corman was already renowned as a



of the stories ended in blazes, and if you look closely, you will see that the cost-conscious Corman used parts of the same footage over and over again in the later films, most notably in the final frames of *The Raven*, where the blazing inferno that engulfs Boris Karloff's castle includes leftover shots from the previous Usher conflagration.

House of Usher not only set the directional style for the series, but also established Vincent Price as an actor prepared to give the script everything he had. The intensity and relish with which he delivers lines like 'mere passage from the flesh cannot undo centuries of evil' led many critics to label Price as

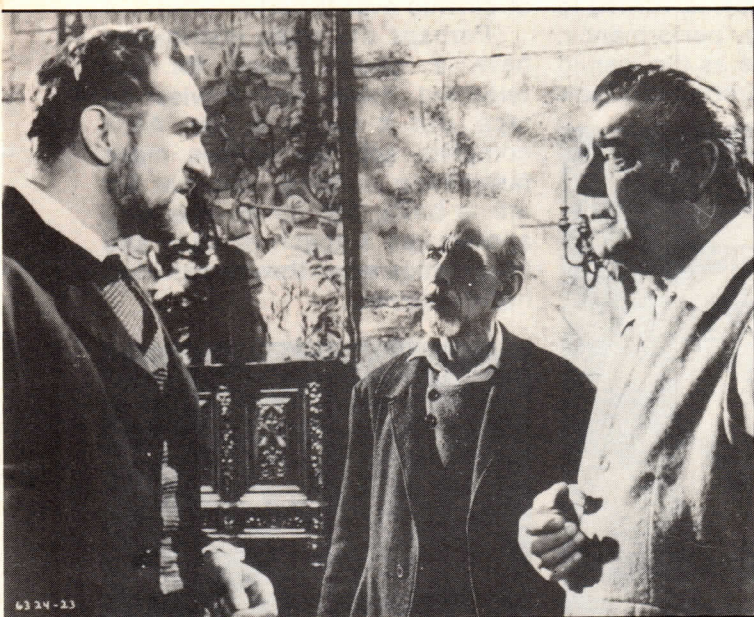
something of a 'ham'. This is rather unfair considering he had to deal both with Richard Matheson's often wayward screenplays and the fact that the penny-pinching Corman often shot the AlPoe films almost entirely on one set. Price graduated to films from the American theatre, and such tight production values as Corman employed must have made it difficult for him to remember that he was filming on a set rather than performing on a stage.

Mad Vince re-emerged nuttier than ever for *The Pit and The Pendulum*, which was made only months after the successful completion of *Usher*. Richard

Matheson's screenplay borrows only the central idea from a Poe short story in this brooding tale of madness and revenge in which Price plays the lord of a Sixteenth Century Spanish castle who reacts to his wife and her lover's adultery by going completely insane and locking them both in his father's gruesome torture chamber. Even more expensive looking than *Usher*, *The Pit and The Pendulum* also benefits from a rather tighter script from Matheson and a superb climax in which the characteristic twist in the tale imparted to all these films is both cleverly disguised and chillingly ironic. Corman was getting into his stride by now, as illustrated by the clever use of colour filters in the pendulum scene, and a final shot where the camera pans rapidly across the deserted torture chamber to fall on a pair of terror stricken eyes staring out through a cast-iron aperture. It's a masterly piece of filming because after the dimly-lit chaos of the previous scenes, it takes a short while for the horror to grow as you work out just who the eyes belong to and what they're doing there. Perhaps I'm a bit slow on the uptake, but the more I watch those closing minutes the more I become convinced that even Mr Poe would be dancing on his grave with delight at this Corman effort.

Tales of Terror, the next in the series, includes a stylish opening sequence with a heartbeat pumping away in the background. 'You are experiencing the heartbeat of a daying man' says our Vince with unnerving relish. The film was a compendium of three Poe short stories in which Price played a drink sodden widower living alone with the corpse of his long dead wife ('Morella'); a limp wristed wine buff with designs on drunken Peter Lorre's wife ('The Black Cat'); and a well-meaning but naive old man who allows himself to be hypnotised at the moment of death by the sinister Basil Rathbone ('The Case of M. Valdemar').

The Black Cat is probably the most accomplished of the three tales. It shows both Price as a versatile actor and Corman as a director with a definite taste for gallows humour. It also displays Corman's continuing obsession with re-cycling old props — in this case a spider which appears not



Far left — Vincent Price and friends in *The Haunted Palace*. Left — Vince sneers opposite Lon Chaney in another scene from *The Haunted Palace*. Below left — Sally Geeson in *The Oblong Box*. Below — Basil Rathbone and Vincent Price in *Tales of Terror*.

